Government, Politics, and Social Structure in Laos

A Study of Tradition and Innovation

Joel M. Halpern

Monograph Series
No. 4

Southeast Asia Studies
Yale University

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

In spite of the fact that the English-language monographic literature on Southeast Asia has appreciably increased in both quantity and quality during the past decade, American studies of Laos and Cambodia are still regrettably few in number. We are therefore obliged to Dr. Joel N. Halpern for his willingness to entrust us with the publication of his research work on Laos. In a different format, parts of the present work appeared separately a few years ago, but these earlier publications enjoyed only very limited circulation. It is our hope that this important study, based on extensive library and field research, will meet the growing demand for information on one of the least-known countries of the area, which has yet come to loom so large in international affairs, and in the Asian policy of the United States in particular. Dr. Halpern, now Associate Professor of Anthropology at Brandeis University, has a claim on the gratitude of the scholarly community for his careful analysis of Lao society and government. The statistical data he has so carefully compiled will prove invaluable to future research workers. The "Laos Profiles," though of course not intended as a scientific sampling of Lao society, nonetheless provide important insights into the lives, careers, and thoughts of Lao in various walks of life.

H. J. B.


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C H I N A
NORTH VIETNAM
BURMA
NAM THA
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PHONG SALY
Phong Saly
LUANG PRABANG
Mekong R.
Luang Prabang
SAM NEUA
Sam Neua
XIENG KHOUANG
Xieng Khouang
SAYABOURY
Sayaboury
VIENTIANE
Mekong River
Vientiane
KHAMMOUANE
Thakhek
T H A I L A N D
SAVANNAKHET
Savannakhet
SOUTH VIETNAM
SARAVANE
Saravane
Pakse
Attopeu
ATTOPEU
CHAMPASSAK
C A M B O D I A
GULF OF TONKIN
C H I N A
NO. VIETNAM
BURMA
LAOS
THAILAND
CAMBODIA
SO. VIETNAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
MALAYA
SUMATRA
MAP OF LAOS
International boundary
Provincial boundary
Administrative capital
Royal capital
Provincial capital
0
50
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MILES

PREFACE

In 1957 the author served as field representative of the American aid mission in northern Laos, stationed in Luang Prabang. A subsequent visit to Laos in the summer of 1959 was supported by the RAND Corporation and a University of California Junior Faculty Fellowship. During the earlier stay official duties were light, making it possible to devote much time to observation of provincial town life and to travel in the surrounding villages. The second visit was taken up chiefly with interviewing officials in Vientiane.

This monograph is an attempt to combine in preliminary fashion observations on both the national and the village level and to explore some of the connecting institutions. Although a small country, Laos is culturally and socially extremely complex, with marked rank divisions in urban Lao society as well as in its rural peasant counterpart and with cultural diversity in a wide variety of tribal groups and resident urban Asian communities. Compounding this inherent complexity have been the impact of the French -- and more recently American -- presence and important Thai, Chinese, and Indian cultural and political influences. Since specific studies in depth are almost uniformly lacking on all these groups and their influences, particularly in relation to contemporary changes in Laos, it is obvious that a paper such as this can do little more than survey the situation with reference to certain specific events and institutions and to suggest some of the general problems that exist.

No attempt has been made to present an up-to-the-minute analysis of the constantly evolving political and social situation in Laos. The purpose here is to examine some of the fundamental patterns of governmental structure on national and local levels and to correlate these with traditional family structure and with observations on Lao character. Non-Lao tribal groups are considered in some detail. The key roles of religion, foreign influence, and secular education are discussed as they relate to changing value systems and to individual mobility. Finally, the clash and interaction of the three types of governmental system -- Royal-traditional, Western-parliamentary, and Communist-revolutionary -- are surveyed. A really complete analysis of these significant problems awaits the work of Lao, Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese scholars as well as more study by French, British, Indian, Japanese, and American observers, whose countries have each played an important role in Southeast Asia in the twentieth century.

Originally published in a preliminary form by the RAND Corporation under the title, The Lao Elite: A Study of Tradition and Innovation, this monograph later appeared in a completely revised version in the author's Laos Project series as Paper No. 21. A selection of specific interview materials on which this paper is partially based is included in an appendix, as are statistics pertaining to government organization and education (abstracted from Laos Project Papers Nos. 7, 8, and 18).

Appreciation is expressed to the peoples of Laos for their hospitality and to the many Lao, Thai, Japanese, French, and American scholars and officials who offered helpful comments and criticisms. The frankness and friendliness of the many Lao officials and villagers who made my work possible has imposed a debt which any attempt at objective description can only partially repay. For revisions and other editing I am grateful to my wife Barbara Kerewsky Halpern.

Brandeis University
November 1963

JOEL M. HALPERN

C O N T E N T S

CONTENTS (continued)

CONTENTS (continued)

GOVERNMENT, POLITICS, AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN LAOS
A Study Of Tradition And Innovation

Perspective

Located in the mountainous interior of the Indochina peninsula, the Kingdom of Laos, with a population optimistically estimated at two million, would appear to have little to attract world attention other than its strategic geographic location. The long frontiers of Laos have been vulnerable to infiltration tactics, and events in Laos will continue to have serious repercussions in neighboring Thailand, South Vietnam, and Cambodia as well as among the great powers. So far as is known Laos has no extensive mineral resources, and the country produces no significant agricultural surpluses for export.

Yet, in addition to a current international political importance, certain features commend Laos to the attention of the area specialist as well as the scholar interested in studying the kind of problems encountered by newly emerging national states. Laos reveals on a small scale, but often in exaggerated form, many of the difficulties facing former colonial areas in Asia and Africa -- a point that deserves emphasis at a time when many small states in these areas are gaining independence. Like the other new states, Laos owes her existence to the happenstances of colonial history.

In Laos may be found diverse elements: a small elite, a constitution and formal political framework borrowed from France, a lack of trained administrators, an indifferent (and in certain respects hostile) peasantry, dissident minority groups, an active Communist organization with its own administrative apparatus, and an American aid program.

Before incorporation into French Indochina, Laos had been in existence for many centuries in the form of a number of small kingdoms. If one turns back the clock six or seven hundred years it becomes evident that at that time the Lao were by no means inferior to their European contemporaries in such matters as the complexity of their religious belief, the effectiveness of their political institutions, or the beauty of their architecture. The Westerner can appreciate much of the Lao philosophy of life and code of personal behavior. These qualities are of inestimable value to the individual, but they do not suffice for the formation of a modern national state. In fact, it appears that traditional Lao values must be destroyed or at least modified in the process of forming an effective governmental structure, and both Western and Communist-oriented programs have recognized this either explicitly or implicitly.

Laos as a National State

Laos is a formal political entity, so defined by the vicissitudes of French colonial expansion, but the country is neither a geographic nor an ethnic unit, and it does not constitute a viable economic entity. If it be postulated that among the essential characteristics of a modern national state are ethnic homogeneity, shared traditions, geographic unity, effective internal administration, economic viability, borders accepted by other nations, diplomatic recognition by neighboring states, representation in the United Nations, and the positive support of its inhabitants, it must be said that Laos lacks most of these characteristics. Still, if one were to define a modern national state as a roughly outlined geographical area possessing a city or town which is the seat of a formal governing body, an entity which enjoys diplomatic recognition by at least some of the major world powers, Laos would meet this weak test. Unfortunately, these characteristics do not appear sufficient bases on which to erect an enduring political entity. [1]

As a political unit Laos has been incontestably recognized by all of the major world powers, even though the specific government may be questioned. Several centuries of domination of the area by four petty kingdoms -- Champassak, Vientiane, Xieng Khouang, and Luang Prabang -- ended when, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, these states began to disintegrate under the pressure of an expanding Thailand and marauding groups from China such as the Hô. When the French arrived they were greeted not as conquerors but, particularly in Luang Prabang, as protectors from the Siamese. At least some Lao leaders, notably the King of Luang Prabang, openly welcomed French explorers and traders. These peaceful contacts helped shape attitudes of the elite toward France which are reflected even today. It is difficult, however, to be completely objective about the pro-French viewpoints, since most of the reports available are those of Europeans, and many of these are French. [2] (Perhaps one day it will be possible to write a history of this area solidly based on Lao, Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese sources. Meanwhile, there appears to be ample precedent for today's strongly pro-French attitude among the Lao aristocracy.) Mixed with this orientation is some degree of hostility and resentment connected with the emergence of Lao nationalism.

The borders of Laos in the 1950's were substantially those defined by the earlier French administrators of Indochina, in which Laos formed one of the associated states. One of the provinces of present-day Laos, Sayaboury, was annexed by Thailand during World War II but was reincorporated into French Indochina after the war. [3]

Laos emerged officially as a nation when it became an independent state within the French Union following the ratification of the Franco-Lao Treaty of September 20, 1949. By common agreement, the King of the Royal House of Luang Prabang became head of the new Lao state, an event accompanied by other manifestations of modern statehood, such as formation of national ministries, election of representatives to the National Assembly, and establishment of diplomatic relations with foreign states. Full independence in the formal political sense can be said to have occurred as the result of the Geneva Agreement which concluded the Indochina War in 1954. The admission of Laos to the United Nations took place at the end of the following year.

The Lao independence movement, the Lao Issara, was formed in 1945, but its members fled to Thailand after some brief fighting with the French army. By 1947 most of them had returned to Laos and were present when a constituent assembly met to draw up a constitution. With the exception of the Lao who served as soldiers in the French colonial forces, most of the population remained passive during the Indochina War: although Laos was invaded by the Vietminh, the country was defended by the French army.

A case can be made for the fact that, as the government assumed the trappings of nationhood, the economy became more dependent on outside assistance. With nationhood came new government services which could be financed neither by taxation nor by exports. It became necessary to maintain national ministries, an army, a police force, a health and educational system, and overseas embassies, to say nothing of instituting programs of rural development for the more than 90 percent of the population living in some 10,000 small villages.

Although the French relinquished formal political control, a large number of French officials remained as technical advisors to various ministries. A French economic and cultural mission was established, and a military training group undertook the training of the new Lao army. Education beyond the elementary school remained almost exclusively in the hands of French teachers.

After the Geneva conference, the United States began to play an increasing role in Indochina. This was reflected in the establishment of a legation in Vientiane, later raised to the rank of embassy. An American aid mission was established, as was a Program Evaluation Organization designed to supervise the distribution of military aid as distinct from the French training program for the Royal Lao army. The United Nations also began to send in technical assistance personnel from UNESCO, FAO, and WHO. In addition,

the Colombo Plan and private relief agencies such as CARE began to provide assistance. Beyond a doubt there have been in recent years more foreign technical advisers in Laos than there were French officials during the colonial days. Although no figures on technical advisers as such are available, in 1960 there were 753 Americans and several thousand French in Laos, while in 1921 and 1950 the total European population was 361 and 802 respectively.

The proliferation of these technical assistance and economic aid programs and even military missions is not an accidental accompaniment of the achievement of political independence. Rather, it is a logical corollary. Deficits incurred under colonial rule were met by the controlling power. The developmental plans of the colonial ruling authority were never as ambitious, however, as the plans and hopes held by the new nationalist leaders. Once political independence had been achieved the new leaders strove to justify their positions by embarking on ambitious economic and social programs modeled on those of more industrialized countries. For Laos the implementation of these programs, even on a modest scale, requires assistance of skilled personnel and financial support. Since Laos has few technicians and less developed sources of wealth than most new nations, her dependence on the outside world is all the greater. The American government has subsidized a significant portion of the salaries of Lao civil servants in addition to those of the army and police, paying as well the salaries of many rural school teachers. In turn the Pathet Lao have received direct military aid from Russia, China, and North Vietnam in addition to economic aid and political support.

Laos is a constitutional monarchy. The king resides in the royal capital at Luang Prabang, and government business is transacted in the administrative capital of Vientiane. Theoretically, the king has considerable power, but neither the former monarch nor the present incumbent has chosen to use his position in a dynamic way (as has been the case, for example, in Cambodia). Although King Savang Vatthana officially assumed the throne only in 1959 upon the death of his father, he had long been acting chief of state. More recently he has converted his largely ceremonial role into a more active, although covert, force in national politics.[4]

There is a popularly elected National Assembly which selects a cabinet and prime minister, subject to the approval of the king. The only elected officials in the provinces are the deputies and in some cases the local mayors and the village and district chiefs. Deputies to the National Assembly are elected at large (in the 1960 elections they represented districts). Provincial governors are appointed by the Ministry of the Interior. There are also local

representatives of the army and the police, as well as the health, education, and agricultural ministries, although all the technical ministries are not represented in all provinces. The Ministry of Social Welfare and the Census Bureau also began to establish provincial posts. Through the office of the governor there is considerable informal coordination of these local officials.[5]

Social Background of the Elite

The social structure of Laos is a complex mosaic of many elements, the most clearly defined of which are the various ethnic groups. The major ones are the valley-dwelling Buddhist Lao; their linguistic cousins, the tribal Tai (e.g. Tai Dam, Tai Lu); the aboriginal Kha; and the sinicized hill tribes such as the Meo and Yao. To emphasize the ethnic unity of these groups, the Lao proper have been officially referred to as Lao Lum, or lowland Lao; the Kha, actually a broad generic term meaning slave in Lao, are called Lao Theng, or upland Lao; and the Meo and Yao are referred to as Lao Soum, or Lao of the mountaintops. In addition, there are the urban groups: Chinese, Vietnamese, and some Indians, Pakistanis, and Europeans.

The Lao proper, who form the largest single ethnic group, also dominate the government and administration, although it is not certain that they form a majority of the population. Since the urban component of Lao society is rapidly changing, it is difficult to delineate the elite with precision but its members definitely share specific occupational, kinship, and educational characteristics. On the other hand, there is considerable variation in their political associations, standards of living, and value systems. While no figures are available, a generous estimate of the number of elite families is two hundred.[6] The Lao occupy the major political offices and senior civil service positions, and many are prominent in business affairs. Most of the present Lao elite are either direct descendants of royal families of the former small kingdoms or of the courtiers who served those kingdoms. This situation is not particularly surprising, for when the French occupied Laos they attempted to make use of the existing administrative structure and officials. As a consequence, it was to be expected that their children would have preferential access to the limited educational facilities.[7] At the time there existed only the small group of urban elite, the Lao peasantry, and the tribal peoples. No important Lao merchant group apart from the traditional elite had yet developed.[8]

Although the French did not provide widespread educational facilities in Laos, they did send certain selected members of the

royal family and high nobility to study in France, many of whom later occupied key governmental positions. Among those educated in France were the late King, as well as the present monarch; the late Viceroy Prince Phetsarath; his brother, the former prime minister, Souvanna Phouma; and their half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, leader of the Pathet Lao. The small size of this group is emphasized by the fact that until World War II less than a dozen Lao had received the equivalent of a full college education, although a somewhat larger number had studied in France for briefer periods. Without question, any Lao who spent time studying in France before World War II would definitely be classified as a member of the elite, although there are a number of important members of this group who did not have this opportunity. But in either case all the elite have been strongly influenced by French culture. (The ability to speak and write French fluently is a mark of membership in the elite.)

Almost without exception all members of the elite were educated at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane and subsequently served in the civil service. As a marginal provincial outpost, Vientiane's educational standards appear to have lagged considerably behind those in metropolitan France, one of the reasons being that it was, and still is, difficult to recruit highly qualified personnel to live under somewhat trying conditions in an isolated place.

Secondary education in Laos has been conducted almost entirely in French by French teachers except for courses in Lao language and literature, which under this system have the status of a foreign language such as English. Attempts have been made to change this situation but without significant results so far because of the shortage of qualified Lao to replace the French teachers at the lycée level.

When most of the present-day Lao elite were being educated there were still a number of Vietnamese teachers in Vientiane. These teachers, promptly dismissed when Laos became independent, nevertheless appear to have acted as carriers primarily of diffused French culture rather than of Vietnamese influence.

Under the prewar educational system the pupils began studying French in the first grade. After completing six years of elementary school, education was continued at the collège and finally in the Lycée Pavie. It remains necessary to pass an examination in French before one can continue beyond the sixth grade. Not a few of today's elite received little more than nine years of formal schooling, after which they entered the bureaucracy, frequently as local district administrators.

A number of Lao received some advanced training in technical specialities such as medicine, forestry, or education in French schools in Cambodia and Vietnam, and several government ministers began their careers as school teachers or as subprofessional technicians or specialists. A Lao trained in medicine in Hanoi could do valuable work in a hospital though remaining in actuality an assistant to the resident French doctor. The French physicians in most of the Lao provincial hospitals handle the more technical tasks such as surgery. By the same token, a Lao teacher can become principal of an elementary school, but with few exceptions Lao teachers lack the background to give courses at a secondary school.

An additional characteristic shared by most members of the Lao elite has been their participation in the Lao Issara. This somewhat unusual independence movement was apparently catalyzed originally by the Japanese occupation of Laos at the end of World War II and was inspired by the dynamic leadership of the late Viceroy. According to available information, during the prewar period there was no serious opposition to French rule on the part of the valley Lao. Unlike the Meo and Kha peoples, the Lao in the valleys never actively rebelled. A partial explanation for this may be that certain areas, such as the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, enjoyed a semiautonomous position, the French only acting indirectly through local officials. When the French reoccupied Laos in 1945 there were some brief skirmishes between the returning French troops and the Lao Issara, but there does not appear to have been any determined resistance of long duration nor any subsequent guerrilla activities, as was the case in Vietnam. Of the large proportion of Lao elite who sought asylum in Thailand, most returned within the next year or two following the King's declaration of an amnesty, though Prince Phetsarath himself did not come back until 1957.

As the national economy of Laos has developed in the years since achievement of formal political independence, members of the elite moved into profitable business alliances with the Chinese and European business communities. This is usually a mutually advantageous affair, since there are severe governmental restrictions on most alien-owned and operated businesses, particularly those controlled by Chinese. (The French, however, are allowed certain privileges.) At the same time most Lao lack the technical experience and international contacts necessary to successfully operate export-import firms or manufacturing enterprises. Many prominent Lao officials now own a part, or even controlling, interest in such businesses as banks, airlines, movie theaters, hotels, sawmills, construction firms, and bus and trucking

companies. Thus a number of the elite have recently acquired a substantial economic base outside the government. Much of this economic expansion has stemmed directly or indirectly from the American aid program. Such opportunities did not exist when Laos was a colony.

The Lao elite has a monopoly on the highest civil service positions and most important political offices. These two categories overlap; that is, a man may occupy the highest civil service rank and at the same time serve as governor of a province or in the central administration. For various reasons he may decide to go into politics and run for the National Assembly. If elected, he can be appointed a minister or secretary of state for a particular department. If he loses, he can re-enter the civil service. It is not necessary, however, for a minister to have been elected as a deputy, although this is true in most cases. The province from which the individual is elected may be one in which he has served as a government official. It is not necessarily his place of birth or even of permanent residence.

During the period in which Laos emerged as a nation the elite evolved as a group with a national orientation. This remained true even though family ties and power were originally based in the provinces. In the past there has been some conflict and rivalry between the north and south, mainly between the descendants of the kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Champassak. Although this appears to have been very much muted in recent years, frequent complaints have been heard to the effect that sufficient economic progress has not taken place in the provinces compared to the city of Vientiane, or that one section of the country has been favored over another. Most of the elite appear to have originated in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champassak, with relatively few coming from Xieng Khouang and only a limited number from such provinces as Khammouane and Savannakhet. No members of the Lao elite trace their origins, to Nam Tha, Phong Saly, Sam Neua, Attopeu, or Sayaboury. Except for the last, from 1941 to 1946 a part of Thailand, all the other areas have overwhelmingly non-Lao populations.

If one examines the background of the deputies from these latter provinces, it is possible to find many cases of elite officials who have served there and then run for office. There may be a few individuals, for example, who were originally from Vientiane province, served for a long time in Luang Prabang, and then proceeded to run for office from the latter area, but such cases are relatively unusual. Like the other members of the Lao elite, most of the Pathet Lao deputies run for office in their birthplace.